Department of Environment and Labour

Occupational Health and Safety

A Guide to WHMIS

The Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System

106-04869/

What is WHMIS?

The Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) is a nationwide system designed to provide information on hazardous materials used in the workplace. WHMIS affects workers, employers, suppliers, and regulators. WHMIS has three components:

- Labels on hazardous materials to alert employers and workers
- Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) to provide detailed health and safety information on the product
- Worker education to provide instruction on hazards and training in work procedures

What Qualifies as a Hazardous Material?

Controlled products
Some hazardous materials meet the WHMIS requirements. These are called controlled products. Examples are

- compressed gases
- flammable and combustible materials
- oxidizing materials
- poisonous and infectious materials
- corrosive materials
- dangerously reactive materials

Products requiring only label maintenance and workplace education
Some hazardous materials are dealt with under other laws. The following are exempt from the requirements of a supplier label and material safety data sheet:

- explosives
- cosmetic devices, drugs, or food
- pest control products
- radioactive substances
- things packaged as a consumer product

However, the employer must still include these hazardous materials in workplace education and must also ensure that the original labels on the product are kept visible and legible.

Exempted products
The following materials are exempted under WHMIS:

- manufactured articles
- wood or products made of wood
- tobacco or products made of tobacco
- products being handled, offered for transport, or transported under the Transportation of Dangerous Goods Act (Canada) UNLESS the driver will be exposed to the product

How WHMIS Affects Suppliers and Importers

Suppliers (manufacturers, processors, or packagers) and importers of hazardous materials that are intended for use in a workplace must provide supplier labels and material safety data sheets. See details on the next page.

Supplier labels in both official languages display the distinctive WHMIS border markings and include the following items:

- product name
- hazard symbol or symbols
- risk phrase or phrases (on containers over 100 mL)
- precautionary measures (on containers over 100 mL)
- first aid measures (on containers over 100 mL)
- supplier name
- reference to material safety data sheet

Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) include

- product name and use
- hazardous ingredients
- physical data
- fire and explosion data
- reactivity data
- toxicological properties
- preventive measures
- first aid measures
- date and source of MSDS

How to exempt private business information
A supplier wishing to omit certain information from a supplier label or MSDS on the grounds that it is private business information must apply under the Hazardous Materials Information Review Act (Canada) for an exemption from disclosure.

In general, hazard information about a material cannot be claimed as private. If an exemption from disclosure is permitted, an appropriate statement must replace the omitted information.

How WHMIS Affects Employers

Employers who use, store, or handle controlled products in their workplace must do three things:

1 ensure that the MSDS is readily available to workers who work with or near the controlled product

If your business produces or imports a controlled product, you may not receive a MSDS from a supplier. In such cases, you must produce one for your employees and customers.

2 ensure that all controlled products received at the workplace are properly labeled with supplier labels

If a supplier label is accidentally damaged, or if the hazardous material is transferred to another container, a workplace label must be used.

A workplace label is also used for controlled products that are produced at the employer's business. A workplace label does the following four things:

- identifies the product
- indicates how to handle it safely
- indicates the availability of a MSDS

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3 provide WHMIS training to employees who are required to work with or near controlled products.

At a minimum, the training program must address these issues:

- the contents, purpose, and significance of the information required on labels and material safety data sheets (for example, What questions do these information tools answer for the worker? How and when are they used?)
- a sufficient explanation of any special labelling or identification systems used by the employer to deal with the controlled product. The employee must be able to interpret its symbols.
- procedures for the safe use, storage, handling, and disposal of controlled products
- training in the proper use and care of personal protective equipment
- training in procedures for special storage systems (such as piping systems), for work in the presence of hazardous emissions and for emergencies involving controlled products
- product-specific training on health and safety hazards

The program must deliver the information that the individual needs in order to work safely with a controlled product. It must be kept current. If there is a joint occupational health and safety committee or health and safety representative, then they should be involved in designing the program.

Trade secrets

If an employer produces or receives a controlled product for use in their workplace and the employer contends that certain information constitutes a trade secret, they may get a limited exemption under the Disclosure of Information Regulations and Occupational Health and Safety Act. If an exemption is allowed, then the employer must insert an emergency telephone number on the WHMIS label or MSDS so that a treating physician or nurse can get the specific chemical identity of a hazardous product in a medical emergency.

How WHMIS Affects Employees

Worker knowledge and use of WHMIS labelling is the mainstay of its success on the job. The employee's role is to

- receive and learn information on controlled products that the employer provides
- inform the employer if there is not enough information on a controlled product to ensure worker health and safety
- work with the employer to develop, implement, and review programs of instruction on controlled products

Where to Get Help

Nova Scotia Department of Environment and Labour Occupational Health & Safety Division
P.O. Box 697
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Telephone: 424-5400 (Halifax area)
Toll Free: 1-800-952-2687 (NS only)
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labrohs@gov.ns.ca
www.gov.ns.ca/enla/ohs

Hazardous Materials Information Review Commission
427 Laurier Avenue West, 7th Floor
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 1M3
Telephone: (613) 993-4331
Fax: (613) 993-4686
hmirc-ccrmd@hc-sc.gc.ca
www.hmirc-ccrmd.gc.ca/

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety
250 Main Street East
Hamilton, Ontario L8N 1H6
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Fax: (905) 572- 2206
www.ccohs.ca

This pamphlet is a summary only. Refer to the listed sources for more detailed information or assistance.

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